# Witham Writers

A Creative Writing Group open to everyone, from absolute beginners to published authors.

**Where:** The White Hart Hotel, Newland Street Witham

**When:** Tuesday mornings

**Time:** 10am until 12 noon

**Cost:** £1.70 for coffee and £1.20 for tea, No joining fees but you do have to buy tea or coffee.

You are welcome to come and meet us, listen to our stories or poems or bring a story or poem of your own.

To talk to someone before you come along ring:

**Susan** 0786 689 6980 or 01376 512470

# Well Met On Tuesdays

Stories and Poems

Written By Members of

## Witham Writers

## Authors

**Yvonne Frost** I am Chairperson of Witham Writersand I have been a member since 1993. I used to write for profit but now ger great pleasure writing stories and sharing them with others.

**Brian Burden** I write poems, stories and articles and have been published in various magazines. I won a prize for a ghost story in the 'Marple' Competition and have researched and published articles about the President Kennedy assasination. I have self published a book of poetry.

**Mary Derriman** I have been writing since I was a child in the 1930's. I started to write seriously since 1960 and I have published five books and too many articles to count. I am still writing and enjoying every minutes of it!

**Patrick Forsyth** I write in a variety of genres: I write for business, I have had three books of light-hearted travel writing published and also a novel, 'Long Overdue' partly set in Maldon, Essex.

**Janet Mayes** I enjoy the challenge of the titles we are given at 'Witham Writers'. Most of all I love to relive my holidays by travel writing. In fact my story 'Hidden Deeds' happened on holiday in Italy.

**Janice Thorogood** I have been writing for about twenty years and really enjoy it. The people I met where I worked in Boots gave me inspiration for stories and poems. I wrote poems for people who had lost relatives, friends and pets.

**Susan Ager** My love of writing started at school with an inspiring English teacher. I had little time to develop any skills in this until I retired. I then did a 'Creative Writing' course and joined this group. I do like writing a good rant!

**Josie Jones** I have written my diary and short stories for many years and attended writing courses. I am writing my memoir of my travels in the 1960's and hope to have it published. When it is finished I want to start on a family history. My life is running out so I must work harder.

**Margaret Gallione** I have always had a love of literature of all kinds. After I retired I decided to try creative writing and joined Witham Writers which is now the highlight of my week.

**Marion Barnes** I have always enjoyed writing and so I studied English at University. My Grandfather, Mother and Sister have all written poetry and articles. The love of the subject held me in good stead all through my teaching career and now I appreciate being part of this group.

**Anna Marsden** I took a career break from law to be at home with my three children and started writing poems, mainly about them. I retrained as a teacher and was inspired to write a novel. On retirement, I joined this group and keep writing poems, short stories and another novel.

**John Joyce** I joined the writers group last year. I realise I've no talent for fiction, but I've found that I enjoy writing on subjects that interest me or incidents that amuse me.

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**Witham Writers** meet every Tuesday morning at 10a.m. at the 'White Hart', Newland Street Witham.

New Members are always welcome, there is no joining fee, no weekly subscription you are just asked to buy a cup of tea or coffee. Please come and join us

**Ring Susan 0789 689 6980 or email sager@sky.com**

## What I meant to say was ...

***Patrick Forsyth*** *takes a light-hearted look at the writing process*

Writing isn't easy. Other people, including writers' partners, do not entirely understand any of this. They try to, of course. But it is perhaps a little bit of a stretch to understand that staring out of the window for half an hour is both work and the most important thing to be done that morning, especially when the bathroom has been scheduled for painting for weeks.

No don't think writing is easy. There's evidence aplenty. For instance, a notice was seen at a major London railway station saying: "Passengers must not leave their luggage unattended at any time or they will be taken away and destroyed". Not evidence of an execution chamber hidden below Platform 12, but evidence of just how difficult writing can be and the blindness that can so easily overcome the writer as they struggle to check things properly. That station sign is only a single sentence. If it's difficult to get that much right, then perhaps writers can be forgiven for struggling to complete a 2000 word article or certainly a whole book in which every word needs to be appropriately chosen and deployed.

Look further: Check in at Sydney airport and you will be handed a card asking "Has anything been put in your luggage without your knowledge?" That's a "don't know" isn't it? A university web site asks you to enter a password consisting of "Between 7 and 8 Characters". Hmmm, let's hope it wasn't the mathematics department. Actually anything to do with figures seems to create particular difficulty; a tyre retailer guarantees that their tyres will not need replacing for "up to 60,000 miles". Worn out and useless after a hundred miles and wanting a replacement? "Oh no governor, read the guarantee". On the basis stated getting to end of the road before they wear out would mean that their promise has been fulfilled. A sign at a ferry terminal announces "Boats leave every half hour... on the hour"; and was presumably originated not only by a poor writer, but by someone with a pretty odd clock. A recruitment advertisement states "7.5 ton delivery drivers wanted"; surely not, they'd never get in the cab. And a sign in a store says "Ears pierced while you wait" – how else?

Instructions seem to pose particular problems. One child's scooter has a note with it saying: "This product is not designed for use on roads". a note with it saying: "This product is not designed for use on roads". Fair and safety conscious enough, but further down the list it reads: "Not designed for off-road use". I hope it's nice to look at in that case; perhaps it's designed to hang decoratively on the wall. A jacket is labelled "Machine washable, dry clean only"; worse a scarf is labelled "Dry clean only in cold water". Another package offers stern advice - "Warning: potatoes – handle with care". Special explosive potatoes are they? A sign at a side turning says "No access to vehicles over 10 tons, except for access" and another declares enigmatically "Sign not in use".

Perhaps my favourite example of such mistakes is in a country hotel. A sign on the inside of bedrooms says: "In the interests of security bedroom doors must be firmly locked before entering or leaving the room". A good trick that. Again this is only a single sentence, but it is one written, printed and placed on the inside of 256 rooms all apparently without anyone noticing that it was nonsense.

Now some such errors can be checked automatically. On even simple computers a spellchecker will tell you not to write professor with two f's and one s. It checks this sort of thing accuraetely (sic), but it won't even twitch if you write effect instead of affect as both are real words.

The truth is that for anyone to write anything even half-way decent then two stages are vital. You must first be inspired to write. Not always easy. It was the entertainer Joyce Grenville who said "If I knew where my inspiration came from, I would go there again". Secondly, even when inspired you must get the words that express your ideas down in a correct, clear, original and pleasing way and that demands you check, check and check again with doubtless some editing along the way. It goes with the territory.

Enough. That's my 800 words and is thus a rather long way of commending careful checking to anyone with a yen to write. So, what to do now? Maybe I should check some more, edit some more, condense everything down to just five words – "check, check and check again" or just tear it up and start again. No, let's just send it to the editor and let them decide.

## The Phantom of the Road

She is the phantom of he road
This moping maid in trailing dress
Bedraggled, shivering, soaked with rain
Her clothes are torn, her hair's a mess
With shoes and stockings caked with mud
As If she's walked a dozen miles
An earthbound spirit's pilgramage
Plying the field paths, gates and stiles.

She is the phantom of the road
A spirit of hawthorne hedge
And fractured light from sapling trees.
A second's focus gives her life
For that brief second stop your car
Open the door and let her in.
Just shift your briefcase from the seat
You gallant driver, give her space
And when she cuddles up to you
Her essence permeates your bones.

And now she shares your lonely home
You sit her down and light the fire
To bring warmth to her chilly limbs
You clothe her in your hopes and dreams
She fuels your imagination
Your constant muse and inspiration.

**Author: Brian Burden**

## Grannie Rage

As 70 year old Gertrude glanced over from her hospital bed, she noticed the patient next door had identical injuries to hers.

She smiled and enquired, "Excuse me but you don't own a mobility scooter do you? I know it sounds an odd thing to ask a complete stranger, but it's because of one of those things, that I'm in here today at Colton General. And I'm still fuming from it all, and it's only by the grace of God I didn't kill anybody."

"My name is Daisy, and as a matter of fact I do!" replied the surprised bed fellow. "Oh! And like you I'm angry and upset. My case comes up next week, but of course I'm pleading not guilty to the charge of drunk and disorderly, as I know I'm innocent!"

She went on, "As it was Christmas I had a small sherry before shopping, and how I wish I hadn't!"

"The jeweller was very understanding though: after he'd got over the image of me hurtling towards his glass doors on my scooter, while leaving the customers in a state of shock, through no fault of my own. There was glass everywhere, but fortunately for me the young assistant there was First Aid trained, and did a fantastic job of patching me up, and proceeded to make sweet tea for everyone. I couldn't understand it, as I know I had my foot on the brake, and still did when I was in the shop, but instead of stopping it just accelerated at break neck speed till it came to a standstill embedded in the counter."

"The police and ambulance were called, and I could tell they were puzzled to say the least by my antics, whilst trying to stifle their giggles. Talk about embarrassing! I'd seen a lovely pair of earrings for my daughter, but unfortunately I'd crashed into the glass case scattering all the jewellery across the floor."

Gertrude who had been listening intently, replied "That's similar to what happened to me. Except I'd shot up the ramp leading to the bank, and everyone inside dived for cover, thinking it was a ram raid. It just seemed to have a will of its own, and like you, I had deployed the brake, but it just increased in speed like a thing possessed, leaving me helpless. I can tell you, I was so traumatised , and I needed smelling salts to recover my decorum. I was suspended from the handlebars of my mobility scooter upside down, showing the world and his wife my underwear. At my time of life too!."

Gertrude continued "I was just so relieved when the bank manager released me from my demon vehicle, and I don't know whose face was the reddest. I don't think I'll ever be able to look him in the eye anymore. The strange thing was, it had been road tested the week before, and was deemed safe, so I drove to town totally unaware of the impending disaster. I'm still a nervous wreck, and will be contacting Mobility World before another model like ours does even worse damage. There must be something wrong somewhere, and I feel we're lucky to be alive, and I think they should be recalled till the problem is sorted out. And to my mind they were not of Merchantable Quality, or at least that's what the "Which" book says. So I feel together we have a good case for compensation. Well once we're discharged tomorrow, that is if my blood pressure is normal, and your wonky knee is alright, we can get the legal ball rolling. I've just had a thought though, perhaps now is the time to use our bus passes to get us from a. to b, or we could always go back to Shankses' Pony. What say you Daisy? Sleep tight!"

**Author: Janice Throgood**

## The Kidnapping

They came for him in the small hours of the morning, their faces covered with balaclavas fit for even a Crimean winter. He had stayed up, reading, so it was easy enough for them to pounce on him from behind. He just had time to register, before he was blindfolded and gagged, that there were four of them, and that the shapes of two looked vaguely familiar. Not a word was uttered. Hands were placed under his elbows. He struggled and kicked as he was propelled down the stone stairs that led from his room, but to no avail. He was pushed into a vehicle, his anxiety churning, the questions windmilling in his head. As he sat there wedged between two of them, he felt an anorak being thrown round his shoulders. They drove in total silence for what seemed hours. Eventually they pulled up. His gag was removed

"No point in you yelling, mate. No-one to hear you out here."

The voice was gruff, as if to disguise it.

"Now, Alex, listen. This is an initiative test. It's the initiation ritual for the new student president-elect of Hall- "

"But I didn't-"

"Silence!"

"But I'm n-"

"Silence, or else! Now listen good. You have to get yourself back to Leeds. No time limit. There's a pound in your anorak pocket. With your experience in the scouts, cadets and OTC, this should be a piece of cake."

"But where - "

"In the middle of the North Yorks moors, that's where, and that's all you're getting from me."

Alex was manhandled out of the car, gasping as the cold air hit his lungs.

"Right," said another voice."One more procedure. Debag 'im, lads."

With that, two held him while the others took his belt and trousers off him, threw him in bracken and left. He scrabbled to remove the blindfold, let down by his cold fingers; he wrenched it off just in time to see their tail-lights disappearing over the incline of the road.

"WRONG!" he yelled after them, but the bitter wind clamped its jaws on his throat, killing the word.

How can they know about the Cadets and the Officer Training Corps?' he thinks, but that training serves him well now - initiative, resourceful leadership, and above all, survival. He peers into the chill heart of the dawn: stony grey it may be, but it shows him which way is east. The telegraph poles rise resurrectionally out of the murk, flinging telephone wires across the landscape like lines of music, with birds for notes. These will lead him somewhere - somewhere with a phone. He just needs to keep walking.

The lines did lead him somewhere - an isolated stone pub. He hammered on the door. A face appeared at the window above and asked, "Wha's wi' thee, lad?"

"Er- Can I use a phone? Please," he answered. The face disappeared, only to reappear looking shocked. A finger pointed.

"Whaur's tha kegs, lad? "

"It's a long story. Can I tell you inside"

The landlord, after expressing concern that Alex must be "reet nithered out here wi' no kegs", and regret that his phone was "down," insisted on giving Alex some trousers and a hearty breakfast. Alex would be glad of the trousers when he later flagged down a passing patrol car. It saved complicated explanations.

"Taxi! Ha ha," chuckled the policeman. "Back to Leeds? Sure. Just tell me where. Student capers, is it? "

He then read Alex a lecture on the perils of hiking on the moors, especially in December. It was no matter for amateurs, even as a part of student Rag Week. Alex was too tired to disillusion the officer. He was dropped off at the main Hall door.

In the early evening, after much-needed sleep, he went into the Hall student bar and awaited the prime suspects. Sure enough, the boisterous rugby club members came in with cries of, "Hey, Alexander, the conquering hero!"

"We didn't expect you yet, you got here in record time! Congratulations, you've passed the test in spades."

They crowded round him, slapping his back. He put up both his hands, palms outwards.

"Whoa, whoa, lads. I'm afraid you got it wrong."

He told them the truth, the truth he had tried to communicate out there on the moors. The crestfallen looks on their faces were comical as he told them that he had lost the election by a single vote. He was not the student president-elect. They had kidnapped the wrong guy.

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## Hidden Deeds

Active listening signals are one of the most effective ways of making a positive impact in the boardroom, or on a date! Turn your torso to face the speaker; subtly mirror their pose and pace of movements; keep your hands relaxed with no fiddling; use eye contact and nod gently while they speak. Avoid distractions,such as glancing at your phone and no fast nodding, as it signals impatience and a desire to interrupt. Quote from the 'Body Talk' column in the 'Mail on Sunday.'

The vamp on the next dining table to us could have written it, as she did all of this. He, the silver haired 'Sugar Daddy' must have chosen the venue at the 'Hotel Milano', overlooking Lake Maggiore for an undiluted romantic setting. Not that either of them noticed the segment of full moon, peeping from behind the mountain on the opposite shore, as we had the previous night.

We had stared in awe as it rose higher, deeming it smaller in the ink black sky. An elongated triangle of rippled light reflected a golden carpet across the tranquil lake. Soon,as the moon gained height, the triangle morphed into a rippling snake of a path as a slight breeze murmured.

Nor did they register the fact that a romantic violinist was wandering amongst the tables. Good, because we had his full attention and I was serenaded instead. Tears gathered in my eyes as he tenderly plucked the strings, his body hunched over the dark ancient violin, pouring every ounce of passion from his soul. The bow elongated changing tempo rendering us spellbound to the sounds from Romeo and Juliet. We applauded with gusto, and then finished our meal.

Shame it was wasted on 'Sugar Daddy' and femme-fatale. Just what was he saying to her? To bewitch her. I wished I spoke Italian and could lip read. All I heard from her was 'Si, si', as she gazed into his eyes as if mesmerised. He was no oil painting,and could easily have qualified for a bus pass in England.

A waiter gently uncorked a bottle of Champagne, I heard the hiss of bubbles and felt envious! Their glasses gently clinked, eyes were locked, frozen in time, as if for the last time. She leaned over and gently blotted his crisp white shirt. No rough rubbing or wifely scolding, just a caress of serviette, magnetism emphasised by the flickering candlelight. Surely Sophia Loren couldn't have played the part any better. What man could resist her?

He stood up from the table, shorter than I'd imagined but oozing richness. She looked down at him from her killer heels, smoothing her satin short skirt, taking his arm as he wrong footed. Protectively she guided him past the empty tables to the outside world. Surely he wouldn't be driving the red Ferrari we'd seen outside earlier! Maybe they were residents, or just had a room for the night?

I'll never know, but will always wonder who they were and what hidden deeds were here. But was glad I was me, although I would have loved a glass of champagne! Or did she work for the 'Mail on Sunday'?

**Author: Janet Mayes**

## Alarm

Sleeping such sweet dreams.
Hammer blows of light and sound
Assault my poor head

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## You Heard It Here First

I went to my bank the other day to move some money around. Whatever your bank, I bet your local branch is just like mine. A row of machines where you won't bother the staff, a row of three counters manned by two cashiers and a machine-minder who doubles as a receptionist. In this case an outstandingly pregnant young woman.

There wasn't much of a queue, but it was lengthening, when an elderly woman pushing a shopping trolley made her way to the counter. She may have had a lot of business to do, she may have had a real problem to solve, or she may have been a bit slow on the uptake, whichever it was, with Mrs Counter-Blocker in residence, movement in the queue was reduced to the occasional judder. The queue lengthened rapidly.

Mother-To-Be recognised the situation and began patrolling the line with a bright 'Anybody just want to pay money in? There was a rumble of low 'no's and a row of shaking heads.

The queue, already obstructing the separate queues to the cash machines, threatened to spill out onto the pavement. The crowd started to become visibly patient, always a sure sign of impatience in the British. Mother-To-Be knew her duty, disappearing and returning with an apologetic 'I've asked for someone else to come out.' We were a little worried about Mother-To-Be, so we all smiled nicely.

Sure enough, eventually another cashier appeared. Discounting Mrs Counter-Blocker's personal cashier, this doubled the number of staff dealing with the public, and the queue knew again the joy of movement. When Mrs Counter-Blocker moved off at last, a swell of collective relief rippled along the queue in a ecstasy previously only experienced on the M25 when the traffic finally shifted.

As instructed by their employer, each cashier repeated 'Thank you for waiting' to every new face that appeared before them. This is bank-speak for 'Thank you for being inconvenienced for the bank's convenience without complaining'.

All modern organisations staff at the public interface at such a level that the allocated personnel will be constantly employed. At moments when that situation is stressed (and Mrs Counter-Blocker wasn't doing anything unreasonable or unpredictable) they are grossly undermanned. For most of the day they will be undermanned to some degree, greater or lesser. From this stem many of the frustrations of modern life.

Now let's look at another case. I went recently to a very well attended funeral at a local church. Like all church car parks, this one is laid out in a way that can only be achieved by rank amateurs with a sunny view of human nature. And I was lucky to find a place to park which, with a bit of shunting, would allow anyone around me to pull out before I returned. I wasn't out of the car before a BMW pulled up behind me. I vaguely noticed that the driver was one of the undertakers.

With a sigh for good intentions so swiftly blighted, I clicked the central locking and went into the church. While waiting for the funeral to begin, I offered a lift home to a friend of mine, a lady named Mel, assuming that I could actually get out of the car park. When we left the church, despite the crush in the car park, to my surprise I was able to back out past the BMW, past the rows of bumpers, avoid the corner of the Church Hall, avoid the pedestrians leaping out of the blind spot, and make my escape. I could only do this because Mr Coffin had parked his BMW with exquisite care in order that I should be able to do so.

Now, the staff at the bank (and I don't doubt that personally they are all absolute poppets) are operating a system prescribed by their management, which in essence, regards the public as a nuisance which must not be allowed to disturb the smooth operation of the bank. An undertaker (and I don't doubt Mr Coffin is also a very nice man) makes his living and secures his future prosperity by offering to the public a smooth and stress-free experience of his services at a sensitive moment in their lives. This is why the bank expects you to wait on the business's convenience, and the undertaker does his best to make sure that you don't. And now for the line I bet you've never heard before:

'It would be a nicer world if it was run by Undertakers.'

**Author: John Joyce**

# A Dedication To My Cousin Elaine

I am old now but I often think of you, forever young, frozen in time at seventeen years of age. They say that only the good die young so I should live to be a hundred.Your mother, my aunt, mourned your death and tried to keep you alive with different photographs all over her house. You in Trafalgar Square feeding the pigeons. There are not many left now, pigeons I mean. Ken Livingstone had a blitz on them. Good job too. I never did like them fluttering all over you and never knowing when they would make a mess on your clothes. There are pigeon squares all over the world and I always think of you. As if the pigeons you somehow took you away from us.

My favourite photograph is of you, at the party, in the hotel where you were working as a receptionist. It is black and white but I recognise your dress. We had few outfits then. Now, people have wardrobes crammed full of clothes. They don't just have one for the whole family like we had. You are wearing a turquoise, shiny, satiny cotton, sleeveless dress holding your slim arms high in the air as you throw yourself into the dance. Your pretty, round laughing face is framed with your dark curly hair, inherited from your father because, your mother, from our family, had hair straight as a pencil.

I remember my father coming to my bedroom with my Sunday morning cup of tea saying, "Elaine has had a fatal accident. " He pulled my curtains and left the room. Fatal, I thought, I think that means killed. That can't be, perhaps injured. No, I knew you were dead. I learned later that a policeman had called the night before with the terrible news. Your name was hardly ever mentioned again. But we all thought about you, of your laughter and impulsiveness.

I was an immature eighteen year old, and still at school studying for A levels. And you were a year younger than me, earning money and had a boy friend. I met him when I travelled on the train from Cardiff to visit you all in Bournemouth. You loved riding pillion on his motor cycle. My father said he would not have allowed me out with a 26 year old. But you had been fatherless, since you were seven, when your father, my uncle, died from a gastric haemorrhage caused by a duodenal ulcer.

I never went to your funeral. My father thought women were too emotional. He had been brought up to Welsh, 'Gentlemen Only Funerals'. But according to my parents lots of friends and neighbours attended your burial. My aunt was surprised at how many people had known you, as your family had not been living in Bournemouth very long. But you had chatted to a lot of people as you walked around the neighbourhood, and went to work on the bus.

When you lived in Cardiff, with your mother and sister Pamela, I often walked over to visit you, and the four of us went for long walks in the country. In spring the woods were carpeted in blue bells and the hedgerows full of yellow primroses. We collected these primroses, along with moss put into two circular pieces of wire, and made a wreath. This we laid at the grave of our maternal grandparents.

When I was recently going through Aunty Florrie's effects I came across a yellow newspaper cutting. I learned that, Ronald, your boy friend, was racing a friend, both on their motor bikes. Ronald lost control and crashed into a tree catapulting you head first onto the grass verge. Helmets are compulsory now. Neighbours called your mother from her house, about a hundred yards away, but it was too late. You had gone. You had been grabbed from us. I used to cry when I read the letters your mother wrote to mine. Every group of young girls, she saw, reminded her of you. Sometimes, she thought she had a fleeting glance of you.

Your sister, Pamela, looks like your deceased mother now. Cousin Eric looks like his father, the late uncle Harry. You have been reincarnated in Pamela's daughter, Janice. Aunty Florrie used to sometimes call her Elaine, a slip of the tongue. But she looks so like you and has your bubbly personality. But, of course, Janice like you is her own person. Your mother always believed that she would be reunited with you and her husband, in heaven. So I hope she is. There can never be another physical Elaine, but we can be embraced by your spirit which will never die while we live.

**Author: Josephine Jones**

## OVER MY SHOULDER

Rose bent down and between her thumb and middle finger retrieved a pinch of salt from the kitchen floor which she proceeded to toss over her left shoulder, at the same time singing the famous Jessie Matthews song "Over my shoulder goes one care". Though her mother had always instilled into her that superstitions were best ignored, tossing spilt salt had been a common practice in her childhood home, though her mother had never explained the reason for her action and even now, thirty five years later, Rose did not know why she had tossed the salt over her shoulder.

Having sung a few lies of "Over my shoulder" she began to think about Jessie Matthews, and recalled reading or seeing on TV that Jessie had been born in poverty in Berwick Street Soho. one of sixteen children of whom eleven had survived. Rose wondered whether Jessie had ever tossed spilt salt over her left shoulder; she had had a successful, though colourful career with many ups and downs and had ended her career in Mrs. Dale's Dairy. Mrs. Dale, a middle class doctor's wife, was far removed from the wife of the market trader in Berwick Street.

Rose had been born into a home somewhat similar to that of Mrs. Dale and had married a man from a similar background who worked on the Stock Exchange. Their two children had never returned home after University, but had gone through life, as had their parents, without any traumas.

When she left home to go to the shops, Rose began to recall several other superstitions she had come across over the years. One related to magpies "One for sorrow two for joy", and she was always relieved if she saw two on the same day; if only one, she would convince herself it was not a magpie! She would never put shoes on the table, someone had told her that brought bad luck, and never give red and white flowers to someone in hospital as this could have been a premonition of death.

She did not have the misfortune of spotting a magpie, but she purposely walked under a ladder, which was being used by the window cleaner, and did not receive a bucket of water on her head.

She bought a pair of shoes and decided to stop at the local Costa Coffee. She defiantly put the shoes in their carrier bag on the table and did not spill her coffee over them. The woman sitting at the next table looked slightly puzzled.

When she went upstairs to the Ladies' she passed someone on the stairs but did not cross her fingers as she usually did. She learnt this superstition from a lady in the 'Townswomens Guild'.

Rose arrived home to find her home as she had left it; no one had broken in. After taking off her coat and putting her shopping away she took a packet of salt from a shelf and deliberately spilt a little on the draining board, but instead of tossing a pinch over her shoulder she wiped it off with a dishcloth.

Whilst she was out the postman had delivered a letter. It told her that she had won a £50 premium bond.

No more salt over my shoulder, or worrying about magpies or ladders - all superstitious nonsense, she decided.

**Author: Margerat Gallione**

## OVER MY SHOULDER

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Rose arrived home to find her home as she had left it; no one had broken in. After taking off her coat and putting her shopping away she took a packet of salt from a shelf and deliberately spilt a little on the draining board, but instead of tossing a pinch over her shoulder she wiped it off with a dishcloth.

Whilst she was out the postman had delivered a letter. It told her that she had won a £50 premium bond.

No more salt over my shoulder, or worrying about magpies or ladders - all superstitious nonsense, she decided.

**Author: Margerat Gallione**

## THE TALE OF PUSS PUSS

Puss Puss is a stray cat that I have adopted, or perhaps I should say, Puss Puss has adopted me. It was a year ago when I saw this small, lean cat in my garden. It looked waiflike and hungry. I hadn't any cat food but I offered the cat a drink, first of water and then milk. The cat was still hovering so the next time I went shopping I bought some cat biscuits. I put some in a saucer and offered them up. The cat devoured them. Next time I went shopping I bought some packets of cat food.

Puss Puss had a companion, a Ginger Tom cat. They weren't friendly and my black and white cat is very timid when the Ginger Tom is in the vicinity. To stop Ginger Tom stealing Puss Puss's food I invited Puss Puss indoors to eat his meals. I was now feeding two cats. I now assumed ownership of Puss because he didn't seem to have a home to go to. 'Meow' he said, pleading to stay in my house.

Well a nod is as good as a wink and Puss became part of the household. He slept on my bed at night. If I was not about he slept at the top end of the bed but when I came to bed he automatically moved to the foot. He knew his place. Once he came in dripping wet having been caught in a storm, so I placed two towels strategically to avoid a soaking wet bed.

Ginger Tom was never allowed indoors; he was an uncastrated Tom and, given half a chance, sprayed everywhere, marking the house as his territory. I made sure that whilst the cat flap allowed Puss to exit the kitchen at will it stopped Ginger Tom from gaining entry.

In the morning the first cat I see by the cat flap waiting for his breakfast is Ginger Tom. But where is Puss? He is hovering in the bushes, too afraid to come in whilst his rival is on the doorstep, masticating his meal. I open the door wide and Puss comes bounding in almost unnoticed while Ginger Tom is devouring food like he has not had a crumb to eat since lord knows when. Indoors I am harangued by my cat for his share of the breakfast. They don't always like the same food and I must admit I become frustrated when Puss decides to be choosy and won't eat what I have placed on the tray for him. I promptly pick it up and Ginger Tom gets a second helping.

Puss is highly indignant. But he gets his way and is given different cat food to eat. The only food I won't give Puss is biscuits. Because he declines to drink even water, he regurgitates the biscuits minutes after eating.

I once caught Ginger Tom stalking Puss, but Puss was annoyed and a smart scratch on the nose sent Ginger on his way. My daughter suggested Puss would probably have kittens but since I could not tell which sex he was and no kittens had been forthcoming I assumed Puss was a 'he' cat. I was about to find out.

The weather had been very hot; both cats were feeling the heat. I was not, therefore, surprised that Puss had lost his appetite. But after several days and with cooler weather Puss still declined most of his food. One evening I was stroking Puss, asking him in Meow language why he was not eating when I found a large lump on his side. I did not sleep well that night worrying whether the cat had cancer. The next day I took Puss to the Vets. They were very amused to learn his name. I explained it was a stray and the Vet immediately scanned Puss to find he had a microchip inserted. She went off to check his antecedents.

When she came back I was told that the cat belonged to someone living in my road, but not told who. I said I had not kept the cat deliberately, indeed, with a cat flap he was free to roam whenever and wherever he wished. The cat was examined and I was shown where another cat had bitten Puss. I could see the teeth marks. Puss was given an injection of antibiotics and another to kill the pain. I was then told that Puss is a she cat, she is eight years old and her original name is Tiny.

I took 'Tiny' alias 'Puss Puss' home and hoped she would get well, wondering how to deter Ginger Tom's unwanted advances.

Does anyone want a randy but ancient ginger tom cat that sprays everywhere?

**Author: Yvonne Frost**

# An early morning proposal

The passengers' events schedule said, "6-40 a.m. - Cross Bukit Merah Lake". Now I normally subscribe firmly to the old maxim that, If God had intended us to see the sunrise, he would never have made it so early in the morning. But I was on the Eastern & Oriental Express, the-once-in-a-lifetime-luxury train that runs the 1200 miles between Singapore, through Malaysia and on along the peninsula to the Thai capital Bangkok, and I wanted to experience everything the classic journey offered.

So I set my alarm.

Arriving at the last carriage of the train, I found the observation car was empty of passengers with only the uniformed policeman the train always carries sitting alongside the serving station. He had a pistol on his hip, but was somewhat bulky and not the alert, lean individual I would have liked to see in such a role. Besides he was sitting with his head lolling on his chest sound asleep. Later in the trip I asked him if there was ever any trouble aboard. "It's just as well I'm here", he said. "The trouble we sometimes get. Sneak thieves, rampaging bandits and the passengers, well, drunken brawls, jealous rages, and the fury of cuckolded lovers. Yes, it's just lucky I'm here to keep you all safe." Actually I do not think he spoke very good English; all he really said was a firm "No!" coupling this with a what-an-idea kind of grin and shaking his head.

The final third of this last carriage is open to the elements. Passengers can stand outside with the view unencumbered even by a window, though there is a good old breeze to buffet you when the train is travelling at any speed. It seemed just the spot from which to see the lake at sunrise.

I went outside and stood alone on the observation deck. Just outside the door it was okay, but when I moved back to the rail at the rear the movement of the train made it very blustery. I retreated back inside, where one other passenger had now appeared. An American – "I'm George from Connecticut" - he immediately set about quizzing me as to the availability of coffee, which we agreed was due on tap here at 7 am.

She was a young Thai, like all the staff on the train she wore a smart uniform, and was also strikingly beautiful. George sipped his coffee and immediately, and with hardly pause for a thank you, asked the girl if she was married. Surely not a question you expect to be asked at seven in the morning just as you come on duty? She looked mildly taken aback and said simply "No". George offered to help: "I've got two sons back in the States, they're both good looking lads, how about you marry one of them?" He didn't wait for an answer, continuing "you can choose, I won't influence you, I would be happy for either of them to get hitched – do you want to see a picture?" Without pause or reply he promptly produced a photograph from his wallet and passed it over.

She looked appalled – were they werewolves or something I wondered – and said, very politely I thought in the circumstances, "No, thank you". Given the level of passenger service and courtesy offered here whatever else was she to say to such an offer? She handed the photo back to George who turned it round so that it faced me. It showed two smiling young boys of maybe six or eight years old. He was right: they were good looking kids. "They are twenty five and twenty seven now," he said brightly. "And both are available". She smiled now, well a little, but clearly thought this was all a touch odd.

I'm not sure that even the presumably exacting E & O staff training teaches you how to respond to a proposal of marriage, made at seven in the morning, especially when it is made on behalf of someone else. Despite this she kept her cool, stayed polite and concentrated on the coffee.

Was the sight of the lake worth the early rising? Yes, indeed. The views throughout the journey had been great, but this, the sun sparkling on the water stretching away into the distance, was a spectacular high point. Besides, I had met George and enjoyed hearing his proposal; it was all part of a journey to remember.

**Author: Patrick Forsyth**

An extract from his book 'First Class at Last'

## Cat and Mysteries

Lord Peter Wimsey, the aristocratic sleuth created by the author, Dorothy L Sayers, has, as his family crest, a domestic cat crouched and prepared to spring. Her statue by John Doubleday, erected opposite his house in Witham Essex in 1994, is accompanied by her cat.

The first mention of a cat in Dorothy's letters is on the 13th of June 1922, when she was in London at 24 Great James Street. She was troubled with mice and asked her charlady to find her a kitten. The good lady found her, what Dorothy described as, 'a vulgar tabby Tom.' In spite of having to spend a lot of time on his own he settled in. He was quick and lively, and presumably dealt with the mice. He was named Agag because 'he walked delicately. 'He appeared, at least in name, as the deceased cat of the Dowager Duchess of Denver, in one of the Peter Wimsey books, 'Busman's Honeymoon.' He is again mentioned when he goes on a visit with his mistress, and later when he 'sends his love' to her mother.

In March 1927, the flat had mouse problems again. Presumably Agag had departed this life, for Dorothy, who was recently married, had acquired a new kitten. Not that he was much help; he was too small land his mousing skills were not helped by the charlady overfeeding him. This kitten seemed to be determined to use up his nine lives because, having survived the over feeding, he managed to get himself made up into the bed between the mattress and the box spring. Not only that, but Mac, Dorothy's thirteen stone husband, had lain on him! He was incarcerated in this way for ten hours while his owner searched frantically for him.

In 1930, now living in Newlands Street in Witham, another cat called Adelbert appears on the scene. He is described as a clever cat, who returns balls of paper like a dog, but he is not very courageous.

The next cat referred to is mistakenly called Peter, for in 1932 'he' produced five kittens. Two were, according to Dorothy, removed to 'other spheres'. In the letter referring to this, there is a delightful sketch of the two kittens complete with wings and halos. Unfortunately it is marred by a bucket in the corner, indicating the way in which they were dispatched .Two others from the litter, were Thomas, who stayed at home, and Squeak who was found a home.

By June 1933 Peter had produced five more kittens, and these were all allowed to live. Their luck continued, for in spite of the Depression, they were all settled in good situations. Again Dorothy illustrates this in a letter. The eldest tom is drawn dressed in a butcher's apron and is seen cutting up meat on a wooden bock. One of his sisters is feeding pigs on the butcher's farm and two other girls are on another farm, one milking a cow, the other carrying the milk suspended in two wooded pails from a yoke. The other tom is helping the parish nurse.

The next letter to mention cats, mentions four. Blitz, the cat immortalised in the statue, was a ginger tom found on a London bomb site. After his experiences in the war, he is not easily put to flight by the inhabitants of the back yard, which at that time included hens and an Essex piglet. It is hard to imagine such livestock in Newland Street these days! There are three other cats depicted in the letter. The first is Sandra, who was heavily pregnant at the time. I wonder how many of her descendents still walk the streets of Witham? Then there is George, a practical joker, who is drawn hiding under a newspaper and shooting a paw out at Bramble who is seen falling off the table.

Dorothy was a versatile lady who, as well as all her other talents, wrote poems. Many of these featured cats. 'War Cat' written in1943 is pure cat lore and I believed is based on Blitz. In it she is trying to explain to the cat about food shortages. The cat, however, complains that he cannot eat salt ham or the unpalatable cat food. When she relents, and scrapes the despised food into the chicken's bowl prior to going to the butcher, the cat promptly changes his mind and steals the food. He is then condemned as being a traitor and in league with Hitler.
Probably the last conscious thought that Dorothy had was concern for her cats. She had been to London Christmas shopping on 17 December 1957. After taking off her hat and coat upstairs, she came down intending to feed the hungry cat, but fell dead at the foot of the stairs.

**Author: Mary Derriman**

## Customs (Smuggled Goods)

How many fags did Cyril smuggle through?
Five hundred twenties under the floor
Of his old camper van. If he makes two -
Two quid a pack, I mean - he can be sure

Of a cool grand. Could Cyril ask for more?
Of course he could. He bought a ton of hash,
A hundred quid's worth, at a legal store
In Amsterdam. He'll sell you some for cash.

Some porno mags - they're awful tacky tat
Some dodgy DVD and videos.
For his own use. You can't blame him for that.
Have you seen his old lady? Christ, she's hideous!

He says human traffic pays the best.
Desperate people fleeing for their lives
From tortures and tyrants and the rest.
And most of them have relatives and wives

To swell the profits when their turn comes around.
Cyril's a pretty enterprising man.
But, after his last run, well. Cyril found
Exhaust fumes did for one young African.

Come out the back. I've got her in the freezer.
She looks so warm, but she is as cold as ice.
It really upset Cyril, poor old geezer.
So is she nice, my friend, or is she nice?

You're right, and she deserves a decent grave.
You have to show respect when all is said.
Now, on that score, could I call in a favour.
So Cyril can sleep easy in his bed?

Lot's of new building going on around here.
You tell me, in your knowing sort of voice,
Foundations for a library and a gaol.
Even a school, so Cyril's spoiled for choice.

I'll let you choose, and if you'll name a sum
Which Cyril finds acceptable, that's fine.
We'll bury her in decent British soil,
Tot up the total and then draw a line.

Hey, just a tick, do you see what I see?
I saw an eyelid flicker, I could swear.
Help me lift her out; bring her in here.
Put her down by the fire, give her some air.

It's all right love, you're in safe company.
Just swallow some of this.There. Is that better?
Should we call Cyril up on the Q.T.?
Say she's revived and can he come and get her?

No, I don't think so either. There's more profit
In letting Cyril think he's in a fix.
She says she's grateful.Girl, think nothing of it.
We're ging to sort out Cyril's box of tricks.

Pass me the phone, love. This ought to be fun.
Remember your mate Cyril thinks he's lost you.
Hi, Cyril, we'll clear up your mess, old chum.
But we want cash up front and it'll cost you

**Author: Brian Burden**

## Children

I thought I understood children well, having taught them for forty years, but now they seem to be a different race. There was always the difficult child in every class, but generally they were willing to please, to learn and succeed.

However, now we have young families living in our road and their children have no fear of adults and not much respect either. Whether it's the parents lack of discipline or the fact that they grow up more quickly I'm not sure. One little boy came into our garden, pushed the bird table over and broke it. He plays ball against our wall and several of the neighbours' children play on our drive as if it is their own.

I have told them off and one child has taken exception to that, showing her annoyance in very rude ways. Incredulously, we witnessed one girl beating up the little hooligan next door, with impunity of course. They get away with their aggressive behaviour, because everyone is too wary of punishing them in any way. In the old days we were told that children should be seen and not heard, but now it's gone to the opposite extreme. Some of the parents in question, have since stopped the intrusion, it has to be said.

However, some children do retain their sweetness. Our three year old grandson took pity on my husband, when we told him he had a bad leg and so he found a blanket, tenderly wrapped it round his leg saying 'that'll make it better, Gramps.'

My plea to parents is to train their children to respect other people's property and to remember 'manners maketh man'. Most are aware of the importance of good behaviour, but as always children's reputation is marred by the few who don't care.

**Author: Marian Barnes**

## Poetic Licence

This is my licence hanging round my neck,
If you folk will just give me half a sec
I'll write a poem that will truly stun you
As surely as a well-placed kick in Kung-Fu

And when folks say: "This is a load of tosh"
"Why don't you go away and get a wash?"
I'll say, "Behold this warrant from the Muse"
A change will happen then. They'll all enthuse
And say "We never took you for a Bard,
But just a mediocre tub of lard.
Though now we know that you deserve respeck
We think your tosh is pretty good, by heck."

**Author: Brian Burden**

## E.T. Comes Out

"Excuse me," said E.T. "I must phone home."
Forthwith he nipped into a nearby phone booth
And, in less time than it takes to describe,
Emerged and stood revealed as SUPERMAN

**Author: Brian Burden**

Both Poems from Bian's collection 'In A Green Glade"

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## Thinking Outside the Box

I had just finished giving the house a thorough clean, it had taken me all morning, and now I was hungry and ready for my lunch. I put the kettle on for coffee and looked in the fridge to see what there was to eat. It had been a while since I had been shopping, so I was not too sure what there was left. Well, it wasn't promising, a bit of lettuce probably not worth bothering about, a tomato and a piece of cheese. Well, it would have to do, at least I had some of my favourite crackers to go with it. Assembled on the plate it looked vaguely unappetising, it needed something to give it a bit of zing. I opened my store cupboard and peered at the shelves to see what bottles and jars I had.

Tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce, pickle but none of these appealed and then I spied the new jar of big pickled onions sitting at the back of a shelf. Just what I fancied, yummy. I pulled the jar out and it was one of those big jars with a wide neck. Now my hands are not very big, but I grabbed the lid with one hand, the other hand held the jar tightly against me, and using all my strength tried to open it. Not a chance, it stayed firmly shut. I took a deep breath and tried again, with the same result. I wasn't about to give up, I really wanted one of those delicious pickled onions.

I had heard that if you tapped the lid firmly on a kitchen surface this helped loosen the lid to make it easier to remove. I tapped quite gently on the worktop, but the lid remained firmly stuck. I tapped harder, and then I whacked it firmly against the edge of the counter top. Did it open nicely for me, did it hell!

Then I remembered that some time ago I had bought two of those gizmos for weak and aged people to help open stubborn lids, or as it was advertised a gizmo for people who find it hard to open bottles and jars. I rummaged through my drawer of odds and ends and found both of them. The first was a pyramid of rubber designed to help you grip the lid and make it easier to remove. Of course that didn't work and I nearly dropped the jar as the rubber pyramid spun off and the bottom of the jar skidded over the counter top. The other was made of metal and had concentric circles of different sizes, with serrated teeth designed to fit different size lids, strong handles to help you grip the lid and turn it to remove it. Taking a deep breath once more, I gripped hard and tried to turn the lid and you know what? Nothing happened! It was still firmly attached to the jar. By now I was getting frustrated and angry, I was determined to get my pickled onion!

I got myself a drink of water and went for a walk round the garden. Perhaps I should just give up and go without my pickled onions. But by now I really, really wanted a scrummy, crunchy pickled onion. I went back indoors and had a think. Perhaps if I can heat the lid it will expand and loosen, I thought. The kettle had boiled so I carefully poured the water over the lid, trying not to heat the glass. Then I got a tea towel and tried to remove the lid. Still stuck. Next I tried to cool the glass down to make it contract a little to loosen the lid. That didn't work either.

I was cross by now, what right did that jar of pickled onions to refuse to open and allow me my pickled onion. It wasn't too much to ask surely? I tried hitting it on the counter top again, still nothing. Really angry now I looked wildly round the kitchen for some other way to open the damn thing. Other than dropping it to break the jar nothing came to mind, so I grabbed my kitchen knife and stabbed it through the lid in anger and frustration.

What was that pufft sound? I picked the jar up and looked at it suspiciously. Then I tried the lid. Oh my goodness, it came off so easily. I looked at the gorgeous dark brown spheres of yumminess and carefully removed two pickled onions and carefully placed them on my plate. I enjoyed my lunch immensley!

**Author: Susan Ager**

## Perseus & Medusa

The King required her head: the gods agreed,
Young Perseus went off to do the deed.

The gods and goddesses had all chipped in
With magic weapons & accessories:-
An Adamantine sword, some shoes with wings:
His cap conferred invisibility.
But most important was his polished shield,
To serve both as a guard and as a mirror,
For anyone who saw the Gorgon's face
With direct eyesight was transformed to stone.

Thus armed, he travelled many days and nights.
Until, in a forlorn and deseert place,
He found the Gorgon's dark enchanted cave.
Medusa'a sisters forthwith barred the way,
Two ghastly hags, in figure scarcely human,
Stinking of urine and of rotting fish,
With dragon wings and cruel eagle claws.
They went for him; he hefted up his sword.
How could he fail, when gods were rooting for him?

So he pressed on into the inner cave
And in his mirror saw therir sister sleeping.
He gripped his sword again, but then he paused.
He saw she was quite different from the others,
He marked the movement of her even breathing.
Savoured her scent - balm from a new-mown meadow,
Resist he might , but couldn't but admire
The delicacy of her leaf-green skin.
Her lips which were as full and green as acorns.
The snakes which were her hair rustled and hissed
And darted sensitive forks in his direction,
A gentle hiss which counselled tranquil thoughts.

And he scanned her image with his shield
While she slep on, helpless, desirable.
His heart felt such a stirring of compassion
That, eyes averted, the boy stooped over
And kissed the delicate lids of her closed eyes.
And then he knew that he would never hurt her.,
He could not even think of killing her.
He knew she was different from her sisters,
The Cinderella of the family,
And Fate had bought him there to play Prince Charming

And so he took Medusa in his arms,
Buried his face among her snaky tresses,
Which hissed agreeably as they curled and twined,
Making a thousand friendly probes and nips
From scores of small sharp fangs.

And she awoke, and curious to tell
They married and lived happily ever after
In a great palace full of air and light.
And, upon every wall, a host of mirrors,
And every day his fierce heart swells with pride
Thrilled by the beauty of his leaf-green bride.

**Author: Brian Burden**

## Decision Time

It is a sunny, summer Essex day. The Blackwater Estuary, in full tide, is sparkling and blue from the reflection of the clear sky. Alison sits on a wooden garden chair on the lawn, belonging to her white weather board cottage. She rests her cup of coffee on the old trunk of an old elm that sadly was a victim of Dutch elm disease in the seventies. Her father had sawed it down long before she was born in 1994.

The lawn meets up with wild marsh where today the tough sea lavender is growing. Alison has a view of the sea and she breathes in the salt from the marsh as she listens to the lonely cry of the curlew. Usually this is her idea of heaven but today she feels like hell. After a sleepless night. It is as if she has a hangover without having had any fun the night before.

She need something stronger than coffee. She goes to the tiny kitchenette in the hope of finding old cooking brandy or liqueur. But the wooden cupboard is bare. She gave all the booze to Kate she remembers. She feared that the old family home might be broken into, as it is now only a weekend cottage. Her parents are dead, but their spirits are still here. She always feels their presence. "What must I do Mum I am so confused."

"That's London for you. First, put that blessed mobile phone away for the weekend. All those calls and gobblegook messages makes anyone confused. Me and your dad managed all those years without a phone". Alison turns off her phone and puts it in a drawer of the old oak, Welsh dresser in the dining room cum sitting room. She slams the drawer closed. That bastard can't reach me now.She lets herself out of the cottage and locks the only heavy door, with a huge key which she places under a big terracotta flower pot full of red geraniums.

She walks around the side of the house through part of the garden which faces inland towards a huge field of yellow corn that ripples in the gentle sea breeze. The sun caresses her bare arms as she goes across the cracked, summer dry footpath.

This path leads to the red brick Tudor farmhouse where her sister Kate lives with her family. The house is surrounded by large corrugated buildings which house the huge agricultural machines.

Alison enters the open door into the porch, full of wellingtons and boots.

"Hello," she shouts as she walks through into to the kitchen. Kate is alone. She is putting a casserole into the shiny red aga. "Where is everyone?"

"John and the kids have gone to football," she says pouring water from a jug into the smart coffee machine.

"What about the girls?" asks Alison.

"They have football for girls and boys now." Kate places the two mugs of coffee onto the sturdy oak table, covered in a red checked table cloth. They each draw up a chair.

"That's nice equality for all."

"You were always a feminist. Me, I'm happy to be a simple housewife. I'm not competitive like you."

"I wish I were like you. I do envy you, married to a good man."

"You have freedom to date all those dishy men in your office."

"Damn one of those handsome men. Believe me they are all --- ."

"You can't swear in this house in case the children hear."

"But they're at football.""You have to get into the habit of no bad language in this house."

"I'm sorry. Slapped wrists." She performs the action.

"So what's wrong? I feel my little sister has a problem."

"You can say that again. You know that Australian guy I told you about."

"The one that had been around the world?"

"No, not him, this one came straight from Australia. Now six months later his wife and kids are joining him. Believe me, when I say that like an idiot, I believed him when he implied he was single."

"You're not pregnant are you?"

"Yes I am."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I bought a kit from the chemist. What am I going to do? That bastard says he will pay for an abortion."

"Is that what you want?

"I think it will be for the best. No complications."

"For heaven's sake, Ali think carefully," she says putting her hand on Alison's arm.

"I will."

"We will support you whatever your decision. The kids would love to have a little cousin. You must stay for lunch."

"It smells good but I have a lot to think about."

"Let me know what you decide. What time shall I take you to the station tomorrow?"

That evening, Saturday, back in the cottage Alison prepares for an early night. She removes her outer casual clothes and inspects her naked body in the full length mirror. Her stomach is flat but for how long? She still has the white bikini marks from her brief holiday in Spain with the bastard. She has always been careful to keep her body trim and goes swimming and uses the gym regularly. Alison looks like Kate who is ten years older. They both have expressive faces, dark curly hair and skin that tans well. But Kate, after four children and good food, has filled out. Alison puts on her passion killer, long, plain, nightdress, and gets into bed. Before turning off the bedside light she looks at the pros and cons for abortion, that she has written in her diary.

**Pros:**
Life will continue working as a Senior Public Relations Consultant.
At 32 I may find the man of my dreams and have another pregnancy and we shall share parenthood.

**Cons:**
Killing a little life
Getting fat
Having to take maternity leave and perhaps lose out on promotion to a more senior position.
Bringing up a child on my own.

Having to face the bastard every day in work and perhaps meet his wife at social events. I might never marry and never have another chance to have a child.

After another night of tossing and turning she knows what she is going to do. I will look after you my little angel. She knows the spirit of her parents will enjoy having a little person in the cottage.

**Author: Josie Jones**

## Down the garden path

There was a good deal Mary was not sure about. Was it Wednesday or Thursday? Did she have anything planned for the day? Who would she see? If anyone; she seemed to see fewer and fewer people these days and, of course, she did not get out like she used to do. She used to go to London every day, up early, off to the station and a day spent in the office of a large insurance company in the City. She was quite high-powered in those days. At home too she and George used to do so much, always out and about to the cinema, the theatre or just to see friends. She did miss George, she missed him so much.

She dressed slowly, thinking that there was no other way to do it these days, pulling on the trousers with an elasticated waist and a matching cardigan that had been a present at Christmas. She was sitting at the kitchen table with a slice of toast and a tray with various medicines and a glass of water on it in front of her, when the doorbell rang. Chloe. It was her day to visit she realised; it must be Wednesday. She began to get up.

"Hi there Mary" Chloe had used her key and was already in the house, as she came through the kitchen door smiling broadly, wearing a yellow tabard and with her unruly hair in an arrangement that appeared to be a failed experiment, she saw Mary slowly rising from her seat.

"Oh, don't get up, you know I have a key, I just rang the bell to tell you I was coming in, did you remember I was coming today?"

Mary had not remembered but she replied "Yes, of course, it's Wednesday, you come every Wednesday." Chloe smiled a smile that said caring with a capital C.

"Have you taken your medicines yet?" Chloe asked, continuing brightly. "Come on, let me help."

She counted out the pills from a plastic box divided into compartments for time and day and passed Mary the water. She visited every week and did a range of chores Mary could no longer cope with so easily since her health deteriorated. She managed very well, she was eighty after all, but a helping hand was appreciated and that's what Chloe saw herself as.

"I'm going to start with the bedroom first today" she said "I will change the bed and then clean the bathroom - why don't I make you another cup of tea and you can sit in the garden while I get on? It's a lovely morning and I heard that the forecast's good."

Mary smiled and nodded. The garden. She so loved her garden. George had worked hard at it. It was very bare when they bought the house, but he had planted a range of plants, including shrubs and trees, creating a maze of small paths and areas decorated by a plethora of colours. It was a place to relax and a place to walk, many family events had taken place there over the years and she remembered several generations of hide and seek taking place around its different areas. Once she had walked past young Jonathan hidden above her in a tree so many times before a slight noise had made her look up. She smiled inwardly at the recollection.

"Yes, the garden would be lovely," she said. She got up, took her stick from alongside her chair and as she turned Chloe opened the back door and then guided her, just a little, as they went out. Immediately outside the door was an old oak armchair. It had been in the family for many years, it was well weathered and very comfortable, or it was with the right cushion. Chloe slipped the cushion, kept just inside the back door, onto the seat as Mary sat down.

"Will you be okay? I'll pop back in a half an hour or so when I have done the first jobs." She returned moments later, put Mary's

pills down on the table alongside the chair.

"That's fine, thank you so much" Mary watched her go back into the house. She very much appreciated Chloe's visits and knew that she could probably not live so independently without such help.

She got up slowly. She wasn't immobile and, even though she could not go too far, she could manage the garden. It was not so big. Holding her stick firmly she set off down the path. It was brick and a little uneven, but Mary knew it well and walked slowly but steadily. At the end of the path she ducked through an arch in the hedge that ran across the garden and was into a small square surrounded by borders brimming with plants of a variety of hues. Further on the path was gravel, not so easy to navigate and she gripped her stick tight as she went along. There was loop she could walk around, she would emerge back near the house along a path on the other side of the garden and should be back in her chair before Chloe came back out to check on her.

Chloe worried if she walked too far. Mary could hear her voice, "Just sit quietly, the sun's warm today, can I get you a book or anything?" But Mary liked to see the garden, George had loved it too. She remembered good times spent in it together. Dear George, she did miss him. But the garden was still kept nice, she was very lucky and walking in it made her feel closer to him. When Chloe came out a little later Mary was sitting in her chair. "Let's get you safe inside again" she said. Mary got up and allowed Chloe to help her inside. Chloe made more tea and they sat and chattered for a while – Chloe updated her about her two children, about a coming school trip, a camping expedition: the school do well with such things Chloe explained while bemoaning how much such outings always seemed to cost. There was a birthday coming soon too: James would be eight on the 22nd. Mary listened, of course, she loved Chloe's visits and tried to follow her news week by week. But she found her mind wandering a bit too, being able to get around the garden was her greatest pleasure; she could still see those bulbs coming up, such a bright yellow, so pretty.

Soon the sound of a car hooting outside the house interrupted Chloe's chatter.

"That will be my husband come to collect me" she said "I'm glad you're keeping well and I'll see you again soon, okay?"

"Fine, fine" said Mary, with a smile "and thank you for getting me out into the garden, I do so enjoy that."

They said their goodbyes and Chloe went out to the car, her husband would get her home, then she had another visit to make in the afternoon. Ian lent over and gave her a kiss as she got into the passenger seat. "Hello Chloe love, everything okay?" he asked, he always took an interest in what he called her "old fogeys".

"Yes, pretty good" she replied "as the weather was good, Mary sat outside for most of my visit today, she loves that, though I sometimes wonder what she finds so nice about that tiny little yard."

**Author: Patrick Forsyth**

## Clumps

People sit in clumps
Of twos or threes, fours and fives.
But I sit alone

**Author: Anna Marsden (Shot Glasses)**

# Speed Walking in Havana

The prow of the ship actually hung over the quay at Havana, Cuba.We had walked through Customs as fast as possible without looking suspicious.Two dog handlers stood firmly clasping the leads of two eager Springer Spaniels, who were raring to go. “Don't touch them” 'Ivan muttered.

Leaving customs we stepped outside into bright early morning sun and stood in awe, as if invading a film set. Bells rang from a Baroque church. Feisty black horses hooves echoed as they pulled a flimsy carriage across the shiny, worn slabs of the square. A footman helped a tiny bride out - dainty as a figurine. The small crowd applauded, raising the grey pigeons into the deep blue sky, creating a perfect photo shoot and was repeated to please the photographer many times.

A nice interlude, but cruise ship's don't wait. With only a rough map, we scooted along once grand avenues of Colonial buildings and hoped to eventually find a cigar factory, just because we'd never been to one.

Turning onto the main street, an elderly lady sat on the dusty pavement, propped against the flaking railings. Her thin legs formed a frame for a crumpled floral dress. From her mouth hung a torpedo shaped cigar. Relishing the attention she deeply inhaled, then tilted her head back, puffing out angry clouds of pungent smoke. Seeing our shocked faces, she laughed and threw back her turbaned head, revealing stained piano keyboard teeth.

Further on, a dilemma at a cross roads, a family called a greeting from a rickety, wrought iron balcony of a New Orleans corner house - we waved back. “Let's go down there.” I said pointing to a narrow side street where a young boy was using a bicycle wheel as a hoop. We said, “Hallo.” He gave a cautious smile back and took the polos I'd given him. An angry voice from a doorway rasped, 'He needs trainers.'

Making a hasty retreat, we scuttled off down an alley, looped round and joined the main street. Now another distraction, a pulsating beat came from Hemmingway's Bar, outside, a middle aged lady, in a short, stretchy skirt with a large bottom, writhed to the rhythm. Oblivious to the chortling audience that she'd attracted! No-one joined in. We slipped in ,just to say we'd been there. A serious portrait of Hemmingway surveyed the scene above the well stocked bar.

At last, opposite the cigar factory, we waited an age to cross the road, witnessing a drive past of sedate veteran cars purring by; a classic car show in motion. I almost felt like clapping! At last a gap and we hustled across the road, staring up at a once fine colonial building, resembling a Miss Havisham wedding cake with crumbling edges. Sadly now a faded grandeur. Further down the road, others resembled the pastel colours and texture of Edinburgh rock. A remnant of a once opulent past.

Tagging on to a small queue, we shuffled forward only a few at a time and entered into the dark recesses of the old building, that exuded a positive time warp presence from decades ago. Here we became passive smokers, as a perk they can smoke as many cigars as they like and they did, clouds of volcanic smoke hung beneath the high ceiling. We entered a small room with almost a cottage industry feel.

A worker selected a large dried tobacco leaf, soon to be transformed by dexterous fingers. It all seemed so homely, with a murmur of conversation. The ginger coloured leaves were layered, rolled, trimmed, and labelled then put in neat wooden boxes. We were told Winston Churchill smoked Havanas and they are still exported all over the world. Maybe the nicotine helped ease the monopoly. Male and female workers, bantered in between puffs and seemed relaxed. But I did feel we were intruding. Although we were treated cordially.

Panicking slightly we rushed back towards the port. Fortunately time was still on our side. A tout beckoned us to go upstairs to a swish showroom of glistening bottles. The samples of dark rum were perfect and felt really good on an empty stomach and we made a purchase!

Now only minutes from the ship, and guess who was still calmly puffing away? The turbaned lady from earlier. How ever many had she smoked?

Maybe we should have bought some cigars. 'I laughed to Ivan as we walked back through Customs - at a much slower pace than we'd left!

**Author: Janet Mayes**

## For the Love of Music

If music be the words of love play on! Not sure I've got that right but near enough.

Jingle bells, I'm dreaming of a white christmas and all those lovely tunes the supermarkets play us from October to January. I worked evenings in Tesco when the children were little. When they went to school I was asked to work mornings from October, to December. Drip fed all that Christmassy musak for all those months, you would have thought it was enough to drive you dolally but no, after a while I just did not hear it, it was tuneful wallpaper.

I like music of all genres, opera even though I do not understand it and have only ever watched it on television, classical music, heavy metal rock, rhythm and blues perhaps being my favourite. I like some styles of jazz but hate jazz that involves female singers warbling on in a way that seems at odds to the music played, just sets my teeth on edge. I find trad jazz boring but at least it is harmless.

Now country music of the Tammy Winnet style, I loathe and hate. If she can't get a man then grow up and be an independent female for goodness sake, maybe she just needs to brush her teeth before a date. As for the guys who winge on that their wives have left them for another man, stop moaning and grow up. I do like Johnny Cash so there is some country I can tolerate - just!

I find it hysterical watching people line dance, especially in this country. Like little Stepford wives, (even the men) all in a row dancing cheek by jowl, perfectly in time. Why? A friend and her husband were great fans of this, dressing up as cowboy and cow girl every Saturday night. Dancing to country wailing and moaning, I can't think of anything worse. Now before you say anything, I did try it and the only thing I got from it was a bad attack of sciatica. I try and like modern, popular music but it just does not seem to be as good as the music from the sixties through the eighties. With rap I usually cannot make out the words, which is probably a good thing, but I do like some of the rhythms. I have always thought that rappers are people who cannot sing but want to be famous singers. I mean how can you become famous for singing, badly, 'it wasn't me' as Shaggy did?

Now big band music, this can be great, a sensuous sound with great rhythm. Just hearing those saxophones play gets me every time, but it has to be played really well. Unfortuately there are some bands who use less than good singers and that ruins an enjoyable performance.

I tend to lump folk and country music together but hey nonny no, I am sure this is wrong. Traditional folk music can be interesting to listen to, and I enjoy watching Morris dancing, but other countries folk music is hysterical, especially if they give a literal translation of it. You know the sort of thing: Johnny went to war with a sausage and so on and so on.

I hate whale music, who on earth thought something that sounds like a constipated cow trying to shit enlightening? I hate pan pipe music played again and again, makes me shudder and feel really sorry for poor old Pan. I am sure this is not what he wanted for his pipers at the dawn of time. Therapists play this rubbish to their clients,becuase it is therapeutic, calming or relaxing. It's not!

Drat, I have just remembered 'Tubular Bells' by Mike Oldfield. Why is it that this sort of music you enjoy on a first listen, but after that it is terminally boring? I almost put Pink Floyds 'Hole in the Wall' in this category, but not quite because played excessively loudly it is still wonderful, not to mention Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. I promise I am now finished.

**Author: Susan Ager**

## "You're nicked"

"Morning Sir! It's officer Dibble just bringing in two suspects for questioning".

"Thank you Dibble, we now have a witness, a Mrs. L. Cason who was in the vicinity at the time. They were spotted on the C.C.T.V. camera in the new jewellers in the precinct, and we're pretty sure they are the ones we're after. Take them to the I.D room. As the witness has given us a very detailed description of the two detainees, items that were removed, also the time and place, I don't envisage any problem. Then, if you'd escort the lady and also explain the procedure, then we can proceed?"

Officer Dibble nodded beckoning the witness to follow him. "Please take a seat Mrs Cason? If you do recognise any of the persons standing in the line-up, please point them out."

Ten people were ushered in and stood behind the one way glass partition. Mrs Cason exclaimed! "That's the girl! Number two - definitely! She was around six foot tall, slim, very beautiful with brown eyes, long blonde hair and heavily made up. She was wearing a navy blue tracksuit, with those oversized hoop earrings, which I suppose made her stand out. Oh! I noticed she had scars on her arms where her sleeves were rolled up."

Another ten suspects were brought in for identification.

"Yes that's him No.7 mind you he's clean shaven now, and his dark hair's shorter, but it's him alright! He is wearing the same clothes as when I saw him with the girl. A scruffy blue jacket, faded jeans, dirty white trainers, and was of Asian appearance, about 5 feet tall, with a skull tattooed on the left side of his neck.

They were stuffing small silver items lifted from the cluttered counter, into an open bag, I think it might have been like a NIKE holdall, between their feet on the floor. Because of the many customers in the small shop the assistant was unable to see the ongoing theft. They both calmly walked away from the scene of their crime, and that's when I informed the police, who quickly apprehended them before taking them into custody. I believe both were drug addicts, as I noticed that they were sweating profusely, and were probably desperate to offload their bounty to pay for their next hit".

The identification parade over, officer Dibble led Mrs Cason back to the main desk where the chief was waiting.

"Thank you for your co-operation, I don't think that we'll be requiring you anymore. You may go, and thanks again, it has made our job much easier. Well Dibble I believe it's an open and shut case. What say you? They will now be charged with the theft of the silver ware, and possession of an illegal substance. Well done everyone, that's another open and shut case. Keep up the good work!"

**Author: Janet Thorogood**

## Curiosity

'Now the time of questions is past
It's answers I need."

cried the librarian

as she stepped under the four o'clock train.

**Author: Anna Marsden**

# Inspector Grace and the Body in the Cellar

It was Maddie Richards who noticed the little door behind the cupboard in the office/kitchen, a low door no more than four feet high. With Darren's help she moved the cupboard, and found that the door opened readily.Darren handed her a torch, and by its light she could see stone steps going down.

"Shall we investigate, Darren?" She asked.
"You bet," said Darren. "now, ladies first. I'll hold the torch."
"This must be the coal cellar." said Maddie. "It looks pretty grimy, so watch where you put your hands."

Maddie descended a few steps. "Aren't you going to follow?" she asked.
"i'd better stay up here and listen out for the shop door," said Darren "but you go on down. Have you reached terra firma yet?"
"Just about," said Maddie. her voice echoed and re-echoed hollowly.
The cellar must be like a cavern, thought Darren. "Tell me where to point the torch," he said.
"A little bit to the left," said Maddie. "Aha, there's a big wooden chest here. Do you think there's treasure inside?"
"Only one way to find out," said Darren, and followed her down the steps. "You hold the torch Maddie, and I'll see if I can get it open."

The chest opened with a squeak of old hinges, and Maddie uttered a squeak of alarm when she saw the gruesome contents. The police were not long in arriving. Inspector Tim 'Amazing' Grace was accompanied by a young rookie constable, P.C. Wally Plodd. The two officers descended into the cellar, followed by Darren and Maddie. "It's a human skeleton." Inspector Grace announced. Constable Plod looked on opened mouthed. "Is it?" he said. And then after some thought, "It must be a woman - the mouth's open."

"Don't just stand there maiking sexist jokess, Plodd," said Grace. "Take its fingerprints." And to Maddie he said, "May I use the phone?"

"Grace here," he said "Give me Sergeant Weaver .... Hello ,Trish? Would you get together a scene of crime team and bring them to the Doggyfam shop. We've got a body."

The crime team was not long in arriving, headed by Sergeant Patricia Weaver. "It's a human skeleton" Inspector Grace told Sergeant Weaver, indicating the open box.

"Is it?" said Sergeant Weaver. "Let's not jump to conclusions, Sir."
"It must be a woman, the mouth's open" Grace replied.
"If there's ONE illegally deceased person here" Grace continued, "there are probably others. We'd better dig up the entire cellar floor."

Soon the cellar resounded to the sound of many shovels.

"Just a moment, Sir" said Sergeant Weaver "isn't it possible that this yellowing parchment cluthched in the skeleton's gnarled fingers may provide some clue?"
"You've got a point" said Grace. "Bring it over here, will you?

Just then, Mrs Margaret Vickers, the manager, bustled in. "Oh dear, all these police officers. What's Darren been up to now?"

Five hours later, the team was still digging energetically, when Police Constable Plodd's shovel hit something hard and unyielding. With a muffled oath, Plodd began to clear the earth from around the object. It was another large trunk, old and brassbound.

"It's locked" said Plodd at lenght. "Does anyone here have the key?"

"Pass me that hammer and chisel" said Grace. In five minutes flat he was raising the lid on creaking hinges.
"Hold it" shouted Sergeant Weaver. "I've been making a book on the possible contents of this trunk. I've still got a couple of more bets to deal with."

There were impatient shouts of "Open the box!" and other shouts of "Take the money! "Okay" said Weaver "you can open it now.' Most of the bets were on there being more bodies in the trunk, but to Weaver's relief it was stuffed full of gold and jewels.
"Get this lot valued" ordered Grace to Weaver.
"Do I get a commision on it?" asked Weaver.
"I didn't hear that" said Grace "but don't forget that it was I who opened the box.

It turned out there was a simple explanation for the dead body. The bones were those of an old-time pirate operating out of Bradwell, who had buried his loot in the cellar and accidently locked himself in the other trunk. The investigating officers knew this because he had had a pencil and a piece of parchment in his pocket and had been able to describe his ordeal as he slowly suffocated. It was a relief to know that no murder had taken place, it was almost a bit of an anticlimax.

**Author:** Brian Burden from his Inspector 'Amazing' Grace stories

## Born Free

Freedom is a luxury that,
No one can deny.
From the greenest plains of Shamwari,
To where eagles fly so high.

There nature's at its purest,
Her scattered wealth to share.
Under glowing sunset colours,
Here no cages to compare.

No more chains that bound them,
In a hellish place once home.
For now Shada, Djunka, and Nalla,
Can share peace and space to roam.

They'll hear the sounds of Africa,
Under a velvet canvas shown
And feel her breath across their path,
As they playfully laze around.

For Djunka has found his voice again,
And can roar to claim his crown.
While his two adoring felines,
Can enjoy traditions known.

Magnificent in their majesty,
Now in their rightful place,
Truly an emblem of a kingdom,
And will a brighter future face.

**Author: Janice Thorogood**

## The Cat Next Door

Poppy is a teasing cat
She sits upon the wall,
When the dogs come running out
She doesn't care at all.

She sits and stares, sometimes swears
And says a word that's rude
When they bark and jump about
She thinks them rather crude.

And when they lie exhausted
With nothing more to say,
She looks on them with pity,
And quietly walks away.

**Author: Mary Derriman**

## Stories Old and New

I watch as the monks lift the rolled scroll
of the parchment from its long box,
delicately,
For it is precious, being made of palm bark,
and old, covered in fine writing
like filigree.

Over the scene the sun breaks its face
in a smile of delight and light,
Egg cracking open its gold,
Spilling illumination.

*

In the newly-opened notebook of the smiling child,
We write his story carefully
and with interest:
Yet not avoiding smudges and mistakes,
this being modern life. It will become
a palimpsest

Where later, much later, relations
will come seeking information
and family stories, with their trowels,
in the manner of archaeologists.

**Author Anna Marsden**

## Peace in the Garden

A foraging squirrel

Cooing dove

A lazy, mewing cat,

A hedgehog, slowly on the move,

A scavenging rat,

Scurrying ants and burrowing worms.

A beetle squirms,

In my garden a tranquill scene,

Peaceful, calm its always been

Creatures of every kind and sort

Together consort

***Why can't people be like that?***

**Author: Marian Barnes**

## A Bracelet

Dolly turned the old bracelet over and over in her hands. It was made of old rolled gold, very fine, and the gold was of a pinkish tone. The outside was engraved with designs of flowers and leaves. It opened, and had a tiny safety chain. On the inside, in delicate copperplate script, were written the words, 'To Ellie with love from Bert.' There was no date, nothing to suggest when or why the bracelet was given. Dolly's mother had passed it to her with the comment, "If it wasn't for Nell, that bracelet wouldn't be in existence. Come to that, if it wasn't for Nell, we wouldn't be in existence, you and I."

In times gone by, it was the custom for a young man to call at the house of a young lady he liked. This highly sensible procedure allowed the family, and particularly the young lady's parents, to inspect the young man and his turnout, to see if he was likely to be suitable. It made the young lady feel valued and cared for, both by the beau who was running the gauntlet of her family, and also by the family who would put themselves out to give her their several full and unexpurgated opinions on the young man. Only they described it as being protective towards her.

The problem in Elsie's case was that so many of these young men came calling at the front door, often all at the same time, and minor scuffles had even been known to break out. She was the youngest of a large Victorian family, petite and with an entrancing smile and a sweet nature that made all the boys long to protect her themselves. However she was too kind-hearted to tell any of them to go away. As a result, the front pathway of the suburban family home tended to get rather crowded on a Saturday afternoon, and neighbours had passed comment to papa, who was generally away at work at the time.

Papa was rather fed up. He decided the simplest solution was to ban each and every one of these fellows from the house. Elsie did not appear to be particularly attached to any of them, she was young yet. Being a very busy man, he decided to delegate to his eldest child the keeping of order at home regarding Elsie's beaux. Mary Ellen was a capable young woman with a strong mind and a strong jaw. She was home after a spell working as a matron at a boys' school in Kenya. He had every confidence in her, as he told her when he called her into his study.

"Now, Nell, I am busy at work and we have this question of Ellie's young men. I want you to get rid of the whole pack of them. Just tell them that I have said they are not to call here any more."

"Yes, papa. Not ever? Not a single one?"

"Exactly. It has all got completely put of hand, and mama agrees with me. She will be on hand to help you out if need be, to see that all goes well, and that they all leave."

"Very well, papa."

The next Saturday the usual suspects were congregated around the front porch of the family home. Papa was at work, and mama in her room. Nell turned to her sister.

"Here they are, Ellie. Now, he does remember to come round to the back door, doesn't he? We did tell him? "

Elsie smiled dreamily. "Yes, of course. He knows to wait until the others have all been sent away, and then once they've gone, we will let him in at the back door."

Nell nodded, clapped her hands. "And I've persuaded mama to organise a nice cup of tea and some cakes."

Mama came into the hallway. Elsie jumped up and hugged her

mother and elder sister.

"Oh, you've both been so lovely, encouraging Bert. But I wanted to ask you something. How did you know he was the one?"

Nell, an incurable romantic, looked at her younger sister fondly. "You goose! It was simple, Ellie. You let Bert call you Ellie, not Miss Ellie. You only let the family do that. Then after that I saw the way you two looked at each other, and I told mama."

"I'm so grateful to you two. But what about papa?"

"Don't you worry, " said mama cheerily, "We'll win papa round." Mary Ellen fixed her mother with a cool stare.

"I'll win papa round," she corrected.

The bracelet was Bert's engagement present to Elsie. Many, many, decades later here was their grand-daughter, sitting looking at the bracelet and thinking of all the 'what ifs' that make up the universe

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## Fire

Yes I'll have the chilli please
and all right, just leave the seeds

A lighted match
flares briefly
inside, help, bring the water.

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## Hangover

What is that distant
Yapping?
I said

Somewhere a fox barked
So near
Just once

I knew it was only in my head

— — — — —

## Cycle

Miser sun
pours gold
on the sea

The sand,
invaded,
affronted,
repels
sea and gold

The sun glares in fury at them both

Author: Anna Marsden

From her 'Shot Glass' series of poems.

# The Great Escape

Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail were not the names of three rabbits, as readers of Peter Rabbit might expect. Dolly, Jeanette and Matt had been brought up on the stories of Beatrix Potter, and would read them aloud to each other, re-eanacting key scenes. So it was predictable that when Dad came home one day with a surprise present for each of them; three lovely little brown and white hamsters with big dark enquiring eyes and noses for which the only possible word was whiffly, the children should decide to name them after their storybook heroes.

There was an argument at first. Matt wanted to call his Peter Rabbit. Then Jeanette wanted to call hers Peter Rabbit too, and they began to squabble; obviously they could not have the same name. Dolly was going to name hers Benjamin, after Peter's cousin. Dad said that these were all girl hamsters, so none of them could be Peter. Dolly thought this sounded very convenient for solving the argument, and she looked at Dad suspiciously, but he looked back at her with an expression of wide-eyed innocence. He knew better than to give anything away.

"Lets name them after Peter's sisters then," she said, and they agreed.

The children needed this kind of cheering up, having lost some previous pets. First there had been Whittie, a yellow and green budgie. They had come home from a long weekend away with mum and dad to find Whittie lying on his back on the floor of his cage in the living room, quite dead. Dolly and Jeanette cried their eyes out, and this was not helped by Mum shouting and yelling at Dad that it was all his fault for not making "the proper arrangements", whatever those were.

Then there were Jack and Jill, the black and white rabbits that Dad brought to console them. He built a wooden hutch for them on his allotment, as Mum would not have them at the house. But then one day when Jack and Jill were out among the green beans and the lettuces, a huge bird came swooping down and attacked Jack, grabbing him in its claws. The shrieks and the screams of the children did not deter it. Dad scooped up Jill with one arm and shouted at the bird, all to no avail to save Jack. The children wept torrents.

"Nature red in tooth and claw," said Dad, but they had no idea what he meant.

After that Dad brought home the three hamsters, even though Mum wanted to ban pets. "I persuaded your Mum that this would be good for you all, to have something to look after, to take responsibility for. I've even convinced her they can live here in our garden. She won't have them in the house but I've made them a nice hut to live in."

He beamed proudly as the children hugged him and squealed with delight. Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail were a great success. The children looked after them, and even sneaked them into the house to play with them in their bedrooms. They had to keep a close eye on them, however, for the little animals were the most terrible chewers. Matt said it was because their teeth never stopped growing, but then admitted that he might be getting mixed up with rabbits.

The children made up and illustrated stories about the hamsters, just like Beatrix Potter had done. The hamster idyll continued for a while, until the terrible day when the children went down to the hut in the garden, only to find it completely empty. They hunted all round the garden, but there was no sign at all of Flopsy, Mopsy or Cottontail. They went into the kitchen, sobbing. "I bet a rat's got them," said Mum, with an 'I -told-you-so' tone.
Dad suggested they went to have another look, and led the children back into the garden. Soon they were all standing staring at the hole in the back wall of the hut, which had clearly been made by the hamsters gnawing at it. Perhaps they had even taken it in turns.

"Oops," said Dad. "Looks like the Great Escape happened here."
Dolly, Jeanette and Matt could not understand at all why their pets would want to escape: they had been much loved and well looked after. However the one thing that was clear, was that Dad had evidently forgotten about hamsters' teeth growing all the time and their tendency to chew.

For he had made the hut not of metal, but of wood. And hamsters are such escape artistes.
**Author: Anna Marsden**

## 8 o'clock Service

And dropping like a stone
into the well
the deep well of silence;
with its coolness and calm,
cooling the heat of our desires
dousing our material fires
bringing healing and balm

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## Last Contact

I held your left hand
As you were sleeping so peacefully
Sudddenly you squeezed my hand
So hard, your famous strong grip
Crushing knuckles.

Oh! Could it be ....?
But no, still unconcious
on the acute ward.

No miracles today.

**Author: Anna Marsden**

## Gramp's Spaceship

Pete told me that his gramps was an inventor
And had a lock-up toolshed full of secrets.
And sure enough, after we had picked the padlock
We found a rusting rocket ship inside
Among the saws and chisels, planes and mallets.

With tentative feet we climbed into the cabin
We pulled some levers and pressed some buttons
And felt the soft vibrations as the engine
Woke easily to life and then to lift-off.
All in one deep movement. Soon the ship was winging
Into deep space, beyond the solar system.
Beyond the universe itself it sped.

We're travelling still, towards some distant beachhead
When we get there, by gosh we'll have a party
With jelly and balloons and paper chains.
With pass the parcel, forfeits and charades
And all you readers will be special guests.
So just give us a centuary or two
Then come and get your noses in the trough.

**Author: Brian Burden**

## A Kiss From The Trenches

A faint remembrance of the fires in France
Glowed in the grate; from logs of apple wood
Billowed ominous wraiths of greensih smoke
Wafting innoucuously up the flue

His ghost intruded on her lonely hours
And, in the dying embers of his eyes
She saw expressed her lover's mild surprise
At finding love transcended mortal powers

He spied the image of a little child
Sheltering in the shadows of her skirts
His pain lived on. He groaned`; "It hurts! It hurts!."
"Be calm" said she, and stroked his brow and smiled.
So, soothed and nurtured by her healing hand
And gazing on the child who was to be
He kissed her lips and, very tenderly
The lovers said farewell in No Man's Land.

**Author: Brian Burden**